

The Sapling by flippyspoon

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Summary:

Billy's mark appears.

The Sapling

Author's Note:

I wrote a soulmates/soul marks thingy AU! Which is usually not my jam! But magical realism is lol!

When Billy first sees the tree sapling tattoo that has appeared above his navel, he feels a cold rush of dread. It's not like he didn't know he'd get a tree. Generally speaking: you get a tree and your soulmate is a boy, you get a flower and your soulmate is a girl. There are other things that grow in the marks too; vines and flowering cacti, the marks that signify somebody who isn't quite a tree or a flower. But Billy has a tree, or he's going to someday when he meets his soulmate. For now he has a tiny little leafless sapling, a few roots descending below his navel.

Billy feels dread because though he's not surprised, that doesn't mean he's *allowed* to have a tree. It doesn't mean Neil won't fly off the handle if he sees the mark. Not that Billy can help it.

Okay, he thinks. So he'll just have to keep his shirt on. It's just a little mark around his belly button. He's heard they get bigger when you get to know your soulmate. His won't get bigger anytime soon. There's no way his soulmate lives in Hawkins.

The universe has never been kind to him, so it's not like Steve Harrington has a little tree sapling too. It's not as if they'll *match*.

So an average straight guy gets a little flower bud and a girl gets that guy's tree sapling.

But Billy has heard that when a boy gets a tree, his soulmate's tree will match the other's mark exactly. Billy's heard stories about girls with matching geraniums blooming across their breasts.

Billy stands in front of the mirror and imagines Steve Harrington standing in front of his mirror, staring, astonished, at a tree sapling that looks just like Billy's. It's hopeless, but it makes Billy very nearly smile as he smokes. He thinks about how he's going to have to hide

his mark from Neil.

Steve Harrington nods a hello at him in school the next day and Billy mentally goes down his checklist of possibilities for how he might be able to interact with Steve. He could come up with some bullshit gossip and ask Steve if it's true, preferably something that will make him turn red.

Billy apologized for the beatdown at a party so Steve deigns to talk to him now at least. They've shared a few smokes (Billy kept one of the butts).

Once Billy asked Steve if the nine-inch rumors were true. He didn't miss the way Steve's lip curved up even as he turned his head and muttered, "Christ, Hargrove, mind your own business."

Billy said, "Is *that* why they called you King Steve? Bet you don't even know what to do with it."

He said that last bit to bait Steve but nothing prepared him for the way Steve looked at him, not defensive or defiant, only quietly assured so that Billy *knew* he was telling the truth when he softly said, "The fuck I don't."

It made him hard.

Billy knows it's all probably true. He's seen Steve in the shower.

Although apparently he's not seeing him in the shower today...

Steve's not showering. Billy isn't showering either, and plans on never to showering where the guys can see him again. Because this can't get back to Neil. Or at least he'll put it off as long as possible. It sucks. He already feels stifled and claustrophobic, unable to take off his shirt for practice. But Steve isn't showering either; he's gross with sweat and only changing his shirt, eyes flitting around.

It's a coincidence, Billy is sure, because the universe has never been kind to him. It can't be that Steve has a tree and even on the off chance he does, it's not going to be *Billy's* tree...

Still, he can't stop imagining it; what it would feel like to trace his

fingers over a mark that matches his own, especially if the mark graces Steve's lean body that he's dreamed about so often.

Neither of them have showered with the guys in a few days.

Somehow the other guys have taken notice of this as far as Steve, but not Billy. More likely they just know better than to mess with Billy. But Tommy keeps razzing Steve about it.

"C'mon, Harrington. You got a mark, right?" Tommy doesn't have a mark yet, but a few of the other guys do and they're all pretty ordinary looking flower buds of one kind or another. Typical Hawkins, Billy thinks. "Why you hidin' it? You get a fucking cactus or some shit?"

"Leave me alone," Steve says darkly.

"You get a *tree*, buddy?" Tommy says, sounding way too excited.

Steve opens his mouth and closes it and blows out of the locker room. At least they don't tackle him to the ground to check under his shirt.

Billy thinks this is very interesting. Hence cornering Steve for a cigarette afterwards.

Steve seems quieter too. Sometimes he gets like that, a little bit haunted. But this looks like something else, something peaceful almost. He doesn't even look pissed off as Billy leans against the wall next to him outside the gym.

He does look wary though, and tenses up even as Billy hands him a smoke. "You gonna hassle me about the mark?"

Billy wants to see it and also he knows it will only break his heart, so...fuck that.

"Nah." Billy shrugs. "I don't give a shit."

Steve seems satisfied with that which must mean he's really not paying attention. Billy's never not given a shit about anything related to Steve Harrington.

He's leaning against the wall next to Steve. He can feel the warmth of Steve's shoulder against his. He can't think of a goddamn thing to say and Steve doesn't seem chatty. Billy just smokes and pretends he doesn't care.

Then Steve says: "I got a tree."

Billy has this weird sensation like a tingling in the tips of his fingers and then a tingling in his stomach that turns into a fuzzing kind of electricity around his navel. But he thinks he must have heard wrong and says, "What?"

"It's a tree, alright?" Steve turns him, seems to be working himself up. "And you know what, I don't give a shit. So if you wanna beat the shit out of me or something, go ahead, alright? I don't *care*. Because..." Steve licks his lips. All Billy can do is stare. "Because," he goes on, "somewhere out there is a guy with the same mark maybe and...and I get to walk around knowing he's gonna fall in love with me and I'm gonna love him and...that's the best thing that's happened to me in like...*forever*. So I really don't care if somebody has a problem with it!"

Steve finishes his little speech and glares at Billy. He seems braced for a punch.

Harrington has a tree, Billy thinks..

Harrington has a tree. Harrington has a tree.

What if...

"Can I see it?" Billy blurts out.

"Fuck you," Steve snaps. Steve throws the cigarette down and walks away and Billy watches him go.

The next morning Billy looks in the mirror; the sapling has stretched just a little bit and a leaf is beginning to sprout.

Harrington has a tree.

Billy has so much in his head, he gets distracted at home, forgets to

pay attention and avoid shit; gets backhanded a couple times. He doesn't care. Late that night when everyone else is in bed, Billy stands in front of his mirror at his trashy little make-do vanity and smokes and thinks about what Steve said. Somewhere out there is a boy who's meant just for him, who will fall in love with him. It doesn't matter what Neil wants, and all the shit Billy has done that makes it impossible for people to actually like him doesn't matter either. It doesn't matter that he's angry and fucked up and it doesn't even matter that Steve Harrington will never love him. Because out there is a boy who he's going to fall in love with who will love him back. There is actually something comforting about that, even if Billy would never admit it to anybody because getting gooey over marks is for chicks.

Billy's bruised up the next day and Steve squints at that when Billy approaches him at school. Steve seems irritated by everybody which maybe means it's a good time for Billy to swoop in and not be a dick, try for friends. Because even if they're meant for other people, Billy can't imagine looking at anybody but Steve now. The mark may know all but it hasn't told his heart yet.

"Hey, Harrington," Billy says. He tips his chin up, tries to look like he's challenging Harrington. Except that his stupid heart that won't listen to any soulmate talk is picking up speed. Steve's looking right at him, frowning, maybe because Billy is bruised and Steve is that nice. "You want to uh..."

Goddammit.

"You want to hang out at the quarry?" Billy finally manages. "Or something. Cut loose?"

Steve looks at him blankly, like maybe he was expecting Billy to say something entirely different. "Yeah okay. You..." Steve scratches his head, disrupting his thick hair that flops in a different direction. "You don't care about... I mean I wasn't lying about the tree, ya know. Sooner or later everybody's gonna know."

Billy almost laughs but he keeps it together enough to give nothing

away and says, “Nah, I don’t give a shit. Seven, yeah?”

He should give a shit, he thinks. It’s stupid not to. If word gets back to Neil that the Harrington boy has a tree and Billy is hanging out with him...

“Okay sure. Cool. You’re not gonna throw me in, are you?” Steve smiles wryly.

“Well, we’ll see how it goes, pretty boy,” Billy says, winking.

So Billy meets Steve at the quarry and it’s *fun*. Billy can’t remember the last time he felt so easy. They talk trash about everybody at school. Steve even tells him how he did love Nancy but he’s also not too surprised he has a tree. He looks at Billy hard when he asks about a mark. Billy lies and says he has no mark yet. It’s such a stupid lie, his face feels hot like when he lied when he was little. It’s obvious he has a mark and it’s obvious it’s a tree. But Steve seems to accept the lie.

At school they find each other, smoke under the bleachers, and whisper snarky comments in class. Suddenly they’re inseparable.

Billy’s sapling is growing. Every morning now there’s a change; a full leaf, a root stretching further down toward his cock and blending into the little bit of blonde happy trail there, a tiny branch reaching out.

He doesn’t know everything about how the marks work. Some part of him believed he’d never get one even if he wanted it. Some people don’t get a mark at all and seem relieved about that. Billy thought he wouldn’t get one because he didn’t deserve it. His father’s said as much.

But he has one and it’s changing. He could have sworn that the marks only start changing once you become closer to your soulmate. But the only person he’s become closer to is...

“Do you want to see it?” Steve is lying back on the hood of the Camaro. They’re both a little high. Billy feels warm and floaty and Steve is squished up against him.

“Hmm?” Billy turns his head and Steve is so close.

I could kiss him.

“My mark,” Steve says. “My tree. You wanna see it? It’s changing... I thought... Anyway. Nevermind.”

Steve keeps bringing this up. It’s fucking annoying. It’s like Steve is eager to break his heart, not that he’d know Billy is in love with him. But he’s high and he feels okay. Weed might blunt the heartbreak. So Billy nods.

“Sure, Harrington. Let’s see this famous tree of yours.”

“Mm.” Steve breathes hard through his nose and then he’s sitting up and taking off his shirt. Billy braces himself and wishes he had some whiskey on top of the weed. He takes a breath and hears Steve flop back down on his back, hears the heave of Steve’s breathing like he’s just run a long way. So Billy turns his head and looks.

Billy thinks for a moment that he must be imagining his own mark all wrong because Steve’s matches his *exactly* but that can’t be right because the universe has never been kind to him.

Billy says, “Oh.” He can’t think of anything to say, can’t even make his legs carry him away in a panic. All he can do is stare at the now leafy little sapling growing above Steve’s navel, the roots dipping below the waistline of his jeans. “It’s...” Billy doesn’t think he had a sentence in mind. He doesn’t have anything in mind except that *Steve Harrington’s mark matches his exactly*.

He can’t quite help himself. He watches his own hand slowly reach out and then he’s touching Steve’s mark just like he’d imagined, tracing the little leaves with the tip of his finger. Steve’s breath is short as he lays back, letting Billy softly touch his mark. Steve’s mouth is parted when Billy looks up at him.

“Ah...that feels really nice,” Steve says, and his voice is so much deeper than usual. “Um... You don’t have a mark?”

It’s ridiculous at this point. Steve keeps asking and asking but Billy keeps saying no while refusing to take off shirt and Steve isn’t challenging him. If Billy wasn’t feeling really stupid about Steve

Harrington these days he might notice that Steve is waiting for him.

Billy covers Steve's sapling with his palm. He feels his own mark too warm on the surface of his skin, that fuzzy electricity returning. He imagines Steve seeing his matching tree. There's no way he'd be happy about it, being stuck with Billy for the rest of his life.

Billy swallows and wishes they could stay like this, caught in this in between where Billy knows that by some impossible stretch of the universe Steve Harrington was meant for him and Steve has no idea.

"No," Billy says.

"Oh." Steve looks crushed at that, but he covers Billy's hand with his own and presses it to his little tree. "Um..." Steve slowly slides their hands down and Billy's getting hard, feels his face heat up, as Steve moves their hands down to his crotch. "Do you...want...?"

"Yeah." And it's almost like he's floating above his body as he watches Steve scramble to unzip his jeans and he slides his palm down the little sapling, hears Steve all breathy and responsive as he rakes his fingers over the roots descending into dark little hairs until Billy's hand is covering Steve's swelling erection.

"God," Steve whispers. "Please...."

Billy palms him and feels his own mark sending out tendrils of pleasure through his body. He remembers hearing something about this in health class, that getting physical with your soulmate makes the marks increase your pleasure. But this...

Billy's barely doing anything, just palming Steve through his briefs but Steve is *writhing*, arching a little like he can't stand how good it feels. "Jesus...yeah...so... Billy...."

Billy just watches, his mouth agape, a bit pained by how hard he is in his jeans, weakened by the hot buzzy pleasure spreading from his little sapling.

"Kiss me," Steve says, and he barely gets it out before Billy leans down to meet his mouth. He kisses Steve and brings him off, so enchanted that he doesn't even think to shove his hand down inside

Steve's underwear.

He can't imagine what being *inside* Steve would be like, or vice versa, if just this feels so good.

Steve is *shouting*, his head thrown back and Billy moves his hand faster, kisses him again, sucking on his tongue as Steve comes, gripping Billy's shoulders.

It takes Steve a long time to catch his breath, but still panting he says, "You'd have a tree too. Wouldn't you? You can tell me."

"I guess." Billy's still hard and he aches but he can't he can't he *can't* because what if Steve hates him what if...

He's not thinking clearly, he knows. There are things which are obvious and he's missing them.

Steve turns on his side, still shirtless and hot and he reaches a hand out that rests right above Billy's navel, his hand like a hot iron through the t-shirt. Billy breathes in sharply, tries to cover, feels like he'll burst with love for Steve.

"You'll tell me when you get one?" Steve says. He looks so sad when he says it. "Won't you?"

"Sure. Whatever."

"Okay."

They lie like that for a long time. Billy pushes his luck hard, misses curfew. But it's worth it to lie there next to Steve, resting in the warm pleasure of Steve's hand atop his mark. He feels like he's full of light.

Nothing else happens and they don't kiss again but it doesn't feel weird. Finally they go home and Billy's blown way past curfew. Yet no one is awake when he gets home. That only means Neil needed to sleep and the pain is coming the next day.

Billy doesn't sleep, all he can think of is how Steve sounded while Billy was bringing him off, how his mark was hot on under Billy's fingers, how Steve Harrington is meant for him. He cracks at four in

the morning and takes off his shirt to look in the mirror.

The sapling is more like a tree than a sapling now, it's trunk has grown up into the crease between Billy's upper abdominal muscles, little leaves sprouting along thin branches.

Steve did that.

Billy stands there touching the lines of his mark and imagining it's Steve. He's grinning from ear to ear for a while before he knows he's doing it.

In the morning, Billy is so distracted he forgets *everything* important. He takes a shower and walks right out in his towel and Neil, who is already on the warpath, sees his tree.

It's bad.

Later Billy is staggering through the woods because he's been there before and once he found his way to Harrington's backyard and took a mental note. Everything hurts. He doesn't have to look to know that his chest is particularly fucked up because Neil seemed to be trying to destroy the mark by destroying Billy.

He throws up a couple of times but he makes it, tears brimming in his eyes when he comes up on the Harrington pool.

Billy collapses in a deck chair and his hands are shaking as he lights himself a cigarette. He takes off his shirt because his mark feels like it's on fire, but he turns over, hunching on his side, fetal as he smokes. He thinks he sees a light go on above him and a minute later Harrington appears.

"Billy! Shit *shit*. Oh God..." Steve seems to be everywhere. Billy's dropped his cigarette, a bit out of it, but he feels Steve's gentle hands caressing his side as if just being sweet and soft will reverse the pain.

Maybe it does a little bit.

Billy mumbles, "Can I see it again?"

Steve isn't listening. "Your dad, right? Fucking son of a bitch! That

fucking asshole! I'll *murder* him!"

"Steve..."

"I'm so sorry. What can I do? Maybe you should go to the hospital... I'm so sorry, baby...." Steve sounds so upset and also he's calling Billy baby and touching him so softly and Steve Harrington is meant for him...

"Can I see it again?" Billy says. "Your mark?" He's still hunched over on his side, protective of his sapling that feels like a hot brand on his skin. Steve will see it and he'll stop calling Billy "baby," he'll be so pissed he's stuck with Billy forever...

It's hard to see past that logic and everything hurts.

"Can I see yours?" Steve says, and he's crying. Billy reaches up and presses his fingers to the hot tears on his cheek. "Please? Can I see it? I know it's you. It's got to be you. I don't know what I'll do if it's not."

"Steve..."

Billy wonders if he's passed out and he's dreaming all this but he's not thinking as he lies on his back and slowly moves his other hand away from the tree growing on his chest, turning his head to look away because everything feels like too much. His skin is mottled purple, the leaves have turned; bruised and battered. But Steve's touch is light and then he's bowing his head. Billy hears Steve's breath hitch and he feels tears and kisses along his wounded mark.

"I knew it," Steve is mumbling, and he's kissing the little trunk and the branches and the leaves. "I knew it would be you. I'm so glad it's you, you have no idea..."

"You are?" Billy just stares at him, helpless, and then Steve is grinning through his tears as he kneels there by the pool. "You're stuck with me."

"I'm stuck with you," Steve says, nodding. But he only looks happy about it. "Oh my God..." He presses his fingers to a place where Billy's branches are blossoming in real time, lines appearing on his

purpled skin. Steve takes off his shirt and Billy watches the same blossoms appearing on his chest, touching them lightly with his fingertips. “Look at us,” Steve says. “We’re growing. Guess that’s what soulmates do.”

“Kiss me,” Billy says, smiling up at his love. “See how big we can make these goddamn trees.”